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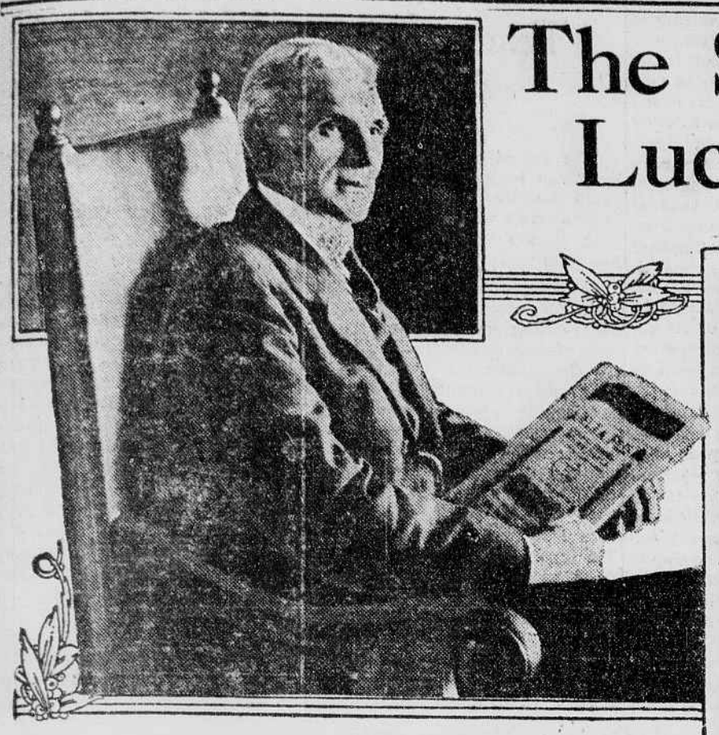
The Secret of an Interview With Henry Ford; Lucky Reporter Had Appearance of a Mechanic



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THE latest formal portrait of Henry Ford

MRS. FORD, wife of the motor car multimillionaire

HENRY FORD among the plants of his garden, to which he gives personal attention

H. S. FIRESTONE, John Burroughs, Frank Seaman, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford

MR. FORD finds time to discuss farm matters with the country people of Michigan

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EDSEL FORD, son of Henry Ford

MR. FORD in a thinking pose, probably figuring on a way to do away with such antiquated farm machines as that he is using for a resting place

By Wilbur Forrest

WHEN Henry Ford, the world's greatest manufacturer of automobiles, broke a silence of more than a year in Detroit a week ago to talk for publication he did so because the multimillionaire Ford to-day has the same mechanical turn of mind of the mechanic Henry Ford of the comparative yesterday.

It isn't often that the wandering newspaper man writes his experiences of mechanical newsgathering. In the same proportion the stagehand is reticent when the man who pays $4 for an orchestra seat seeks the knowledge that lies behind the wings. But it will not be confessing secrets of newspaperdom, folding back the wings or letting out the mysteries of any magic art to confess that interviewing Henry Ford for The Tribune was a combination of the interviewer's "horseshoe" luck and a series of circumstances which revolved around Mr. Ford's mechanical mind.

Boiled down, the interviewer looked like he might have made a better mechanic than a writer and Henry Ford's mechanical mind led him to seek an interview with the would-be interviewer.

Henry Ford's Birthplace

The incident took place in a small lunchroom at Dearborn, Mich., the site of the first Ford tractor factory, ten miles from Detroit. Dearborn is Henry Ford's home—his birthplace—and it is here in this once unpretentious little Michigan village that an interviewer must seek the Henry Ford who was once a village mechanic with ideas that grew into great factories, a universal motor car and wealth beyond the dreams of the idealist.

But the lunchroom incident is too far ahead of the story.

Breaking into the low block of buildings which is assumed to be the Ford offices at Dearborn is the first phase of seeking an interview with Henry Ford. A snail-like interurban car lands you in the village and a lethargic conductor points out the Ford plant. You walk some two hundred yards from the interurban tracks, a sort of suppressed excitement simmering within, toward the Michigan Central tracks, beyond which lie the low red buildings of the factory. You are thinking of your advance information on the possibilities of an interview with Ford. This has been picked up in New York and Detroit. It is that scores of erstwhile interviewers have been seeking the coveted chat with Mr. Ford for many months; that some have reached his secretary, an austere individual noted for blighting journalistic hopes; that Ford has joined the cult of John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan and other kings of either wealth or realm who can't be approached. As you plow through the February slush up the village sidewalk toward the Michigan Central tracks there is a certain train of thought—a sort of "second section" to that operated by old conductor "can't be done"—that it's worth a try, anyway.

The Imperative Voice

Ruminations come to a sudden end as you approach the Michigan Central crossing. A voice not too gentle but extremely firm breaks in:

"Where you goin', young man?"

A glance impresses you that you're not goin' anywhere unless the man behind the voice is agreeable. He is a crossing watchman with a Jack Dempsey physique who tends the crossing gates when the trains whirl by and incidentally conducts the first interview that can be had anywhere near the Ford plant in Dearborn.

You inform him that you are going to the Ford plant to see some one and mildly wonder what it is of his business, anyway.

"Wall, you take a run over there to the general store and tell 'em about it; they'll phone, and if it's all right they'll give me the high sign and I'll let you through," informs the watchman.

It is probably a good precaution, and no one blames Mr. Ford, but it is inconvenient, and you cross the street to the general store.

Once inside, there may be noted a stock of goods that leaves nothing to be desired. A gentleman in a white apron is cutting a round steak off a hindquarter of beef. The customer waits. A youth is selling another buyer a couple of boxes of breakfast food. The next customer, a Ford employee, wants a pair of rubbers and a can of tomatoes. And finally you fidget around from the more elderly man in the apron to the youth of the breakfast food, rubbers and tomatoes until you have the undivided attention of the latter. You name an official of the Ford company you would like to see—and what you want to see him for—and the youth promises to telephone. He sells a box of matches and a bar of soap before he does the trick.

And then he tells you that the official is not in and will not be in. Then he waits on another customer. You name another official. He phones again between sales and the answer is the same. Finally you insist on other officials and eventually make it a broad-gauge request—"any official."

Any One Will Do

Finally the youth informs you that your official will be "over" and eventually he came "over" on his way home somewhere in Dearborn.

Efforts to ascertain where Ford officials live in Dearborn are futile at the general store. They know there, but they won't tell; they are just that cautious. The reason is, perhaps, that another reporter is on the trail. Or perhaps these store folks are just naturally that cautious with every suspicious character who tries to cross the barrier.

But Henry Ford, the most approachable, perhaps, of all of America's multimillionaires, has had no hand in the red-tape precautions that the stranger finds at his gates. I found that Henry Ford has no aversion to newspaper men; is extremely sympathetic, in fact, and perhaps much misunderstood by the outside world, which has been led to believe by some of the officials who surround him—one at least—that Henry Ford himself was the author of the short shrift which the newspaper clan has met at Dearborn for more than a year.

My second return to Dearborn was on the following morning, bright and early. There were the same misgivings en route from the interurban to the guarded railway crossing, the same rebuff by the guard and the same delay at the general store. Officials just across the track were "not in." Finally the youth of breakfast food and rubbers got interested. He volunteered to take a note across to the official I wanted to see. The note was penned, and he commented as he pulled his cap from a peg near the cannon stove in the corner:

"We gotta be careful around here. Orders are to let nobody over unless they give the word on the telephone. Think mebbe I can fix it up if I go over there."

Inside the Gates

He departed. In ten minutes he was back with permission for The New York Tribune man to cross the barrier. The crossing guard got the "high sign" and the barrier was crossed.

Once in the Ford offices matters are different. One is gently assured that Mr. Ford does not make a practice of giving interviews. The usual route to an interview with the automobile manufacturer when he is in Dearborn is through his secretary. Those who try it may abandon hope in advance. To reach this secretary is a task in itself To get him interested in a Ford interview is like trying to walk on the water of the artificial lake in front of the tractor factory. He can't be approached with any success on the subject.

The Tribune interviewer did not see Mr. Ford's secretary. Another official in the employ of the multimillionaire manufacturer was found with humanity in his heart. He was sympathetic, but again the channel led through the office of the secretary. It looked like failure. The sympathetic official however, despite his powerlessness in the matter, had all the attributes of the true gentleman that he is. The Tribune's interview with Mr. Ford must trace indirectly, perhaps, back to him. He asked The Tribune reporter to luncheon in the little lunchroom near the tractor plant. It was sheer decency and good will to do so. As matters developed, it was one of the kindest acts he has perhaps accomplished for months.

Sitting at a large round table in the lunchroom was Henry Ford, chatting on current topics with his officials. The Tribune man was introduced, but not as a reporter. It was only from respect for the host that Henry Ford was not buttonholed then and there. Though formal permission to speak with Mr. Ford for publication seemed to be through the tortuous and uncertain maze of the secretary's office, instinct born of experience told The Tribune man that all would be lost if the temptation to buttonhole then and there in the lunchroom was allowed to persist. Putting aside the embarrassment which might have been caused the host for unwittingly perpetrating a newspaper plot to interview, the temptation was one of the greatest perhaps in the history of newspaperdom.

Henry Ford passed out the door and back into the solitude of months in the factory beyond. And The Tribune man soon after went back to Detroit with a sense of decency and ethics at the expense of a certain kind of enterprise.

Where Luck Enters

There is no halo on the writer's crown for finally interviewing Mr. Ford. Any credit should go to luck, the decent humanity of a Ford official and a parental endowment of physique which would make a far better mechanic than a member of the literati. But something happened in the office of that hospitable Ford official as The Tribune man rumbled over the interurban road ruminating on three or four other strategic plans to work back toward an interview which flitted out of hand in the little Dearborn restaurant. These plans are not necessary to the story. Fate decreed that they were not to be needed.

From Mr. Ford himself and the official came the story of post-luncheon developments.

"Who was that young fellow with you at lunch?" asked Ford as he dropped into the official's office.

"That was Forrest, of The New York Tribune, who came all the way from New York to talk to you," replied the official.

"Well, why didn't he talk to me when he was introduced?" queried the manufacturer.

"He felt that it would be taking advantage," defended the official.

"Well, you know I like that young man's looks," said Ford. "He looks like he would make a good mechanic; he looks like a good mechanic."

"He is a newspaper man," again defended the official.

"Where is he now?" demanded Ford.

"Gone back to Detroit."

"Can you get in touch with him?"

The official was kinder than ever He volunteered that he could.

"Tell him I want to talk to him," said Ford.

And this was how Henry Ford requested an interview with The New York Tribune.

A Mechanic's Dream

Henry Ford, as has been said, was born in Dearborn, Mich. The scene of his beginning in the world is the scene to-day of his residence, which might be more elaborate for a man of his immense wealth. Dearborn is the Michigan village in which he conceived as a mechanic the plan to make a type of automobile that the whole world wanted. It was an idle dream to some of the old graybeards and doubters of Dearborn, but it was not a dream, nor was it idly planned by Henry Ford.

A dynamic force coupled with conviction were the elements which made Ford and his little machine known to remote districts of every land on the globe. Since the idea was born Ford's company has made enough automobiles, if set end to end, to stretch around the globe. His company manufacturerd enough cars in 1920 to span the American continent from coast to coast, and in January, 1921, enough Ford cars were sold to reach from New York City to New Haven, Conn.

So, when an interviewer comes face to face with Henry Ford he is instantly struck with the conviction that Henry Ford is not a dreamer. The world may think he is. He retains that mechanical turn of mind which conceived the Ford car many years ago, the same mechanical trend which caused him to talk to an interviewer who had a mechanical physique, but face to face conversation with Mr. Ford tells one who is any student of character that when Henry Ford believes that eventually cows will disappear and their same lacteal product will be made by machinery from the same raw materials which the cow munches from stalls and fields, he believes it.

Not Like a Dreamer

And you believe it yourself when Henry Ford talks about it. He does not gaze off into space as he talks. Dreamers do. The old cynics of Dearborn admit to-day that he did not moon around much, after all, when he used to talk about an automobile that the world would reach out for to the tune of not millions of dollars, but millions of cars.

Ford's employees are his converts to conceived ideas. These employees did not detect dream stuff when Ford talked about erecting homes for them—homes which they might pay for out of their wages. In the old home town to-day one can see $2,000,000 worth of Ford-built homes with Ford employees living in them and paying for them at advantageous rates. Henry Ford is far from a dreamer. You might search with difficulty to-day for a Ford employee who would doubt that the world can get along without cows. There is a concrete reason. When Henry Ford has dreamed in the past the dream has not generally stopp d when the alarm clock sounded or the first rays of the sun peeped in at the bedroom window. And Ford employees, I am informed by those who know them, are just as much fr m Missouri as any brand of employee.

Has No Office

The Tribune's interview with Mr. Ford took place in one of the offices at the Ford tractor plant. The inference would be that this was Mr. Ford's office. It is learned with some surprise at Dearborn that he has no office. The Ford laboratories which took hay, oats, green grass and water and other elements which a cow masticates to make milk, and experimented with machine-made milk, are as much Henry Ford's offices as the other rooms which his officials or workers occupy. A machine shop is his office to-day, a foundry or workshop or a Ford runabout, or a regular official's room, his office to-morrow. Ford is in touch with the conglomerate machine comparatively as much to-day as he was in touch with the Ford workshop, in mechanic's clothes, before the world heard of flivvers. He is forever exuding ideas, and works, his officials say, on the theory that nothing exists so perfect that it cannot be made better.

The interviewer sat in an office of the Dearborn plant a few days ago waiting to meet Henry Ford. The preliminaries had been arranged, the stage set, and it was only natural to expect, as an opening scene, the crunch of the wheels of a luxurious limousine in the February snow just ouside the door of the office.

Instead, the waiting interviewer saw a lonely figure, tiny in the distance, walking slowly on uncertain underfooting of railroad ties along the Michigan Central tracks. It was idle waiting with nothing else to do but watch the only moving thing within vision. The lone figure trudged along for many minutes, growing nearer slowly, and finally left the tracks to come toward the building. It was within a few yards of the door before it could be recognized as the man who has made enough automobiles to span the earth. It was Henry Ford, in a loose-fitting, unmodish, fuzzy brown overcoat, his soft hat pulled well down over his eyes, his hands dug deep in the pockets and head turtled down in an upturned collar. He had walked, as any Ford employee might have walked, more than half a mile from his home to the factory. There was nothing about him to indicate anything more than an employee of the works. It was Henry Ford, the Dearborn mechanic.

Against Big Cities

In the lengthy talk which followed in the office there was nothing about Ford which signified his millions and power. He first sat on a low radiator, which was warm, and then in a chair. The conversation was simple and direct, but behind everything was force, manifested by earnestness of tone and emphasized by leaning forward and talking directly at the interviewer. Henry Ford's voice is gentle.

One of his convictions is that modern cities are unnatural centers of congestion, where products and labor are manipulated without regard for much but gain by those who manipulate. "Parasites," he calls them.

"Cities cause unnatural unrest in men's minds," said Mr. Ford. "They have created an unnatural condition which is robbing agriculture of its man power, robbing both the worker and the manufacturer of normal human conditions, and creating the spectacle of the farmer's products having to be transported to these great centers to be treated or milled or manipulated before they are transported back again to the smaller communities to be sold back to the farmer. These conditions are artificial."

"What is the answer?" I asked.

Ford's answer was not the reply of a man who dreams. It was that his own company, at least, is already putting into effect the plan to relieve cities of congestion and get industry, labor and transportation back into the country—into direct operation. It may make big chambers of commerce shudder. He said:

"The Ford company plans to get a large part of its manufacturing away from the great cities. We plan, and are already putting the plan into operation, to utilize the waterpower of small streams throughout the country for making various parts of our machinery, both for tractor and car. During the next few years we will enter many of the smaller towns and even villages where the townspeople and even the farmer, if he cares to, may have all the work wanted. This work for the farmer will come when he is not busy on his farm and so will add to his earnings.

"The food raising season is comparatively short and the farmer is to-day a slave to enforced idleness and a few cows in winter."

Easy to Make Milk

This brought the inventor to a pertinent question about cows. The reply was equally direct.

"It is a simple matter," said Mr. Ford, "to take the same cereals that the cows eat and make them into a milk which is superior to the natural article and much cleaner. The cow is the crudest machine in the world. Our laboratories have already demonstrated that cow's milk can be done away with, and the concentration of the elements of milk can be manufactured into scientific food by machines far cleaner than cows and not subject to tuberculosis."

I asked the inventor if the Ford company planned to manufacture this concentrated food, which, he declared, could not only take the place of milk but of beef. He explained that no such plan was contemplated, but reiterated his belief that the day would come when the farmer can make Ford parts in a small town factory until the time comes to till the fields. Cows, at least, Mr. Ford believes, should not enslave him in the winter barnyard.

The Ford plan has been working in a small Michigan town for nearly two years, Ford disclosed. It will extend to every part of the United States in years to come by the expenditure of millions of dollars, he said. Villages will be aided by the company in building the things that villages need to become more livable. The plan will even be extended to England and other countries.

Flivver Villages Next?

Who knows but that "Ford villages" may dot the earth, as Ford cars dot it to-day, in a few short decades to come? Who can dispute Henry Ford that cows will eventually disappear?

Henry Ford would rather talk on his plan to get the worker back from the city to the soil than about reports emanating from Wall Street that his company has dire need of from $75,000,000 to $100,000,000. He denied these persisting reports briefly and in toto. And then he talked about things more mechanical.